

THE JESUS SEMINAR

How Blind Guides created a
"New and Improved" Jesus
for mass consumption

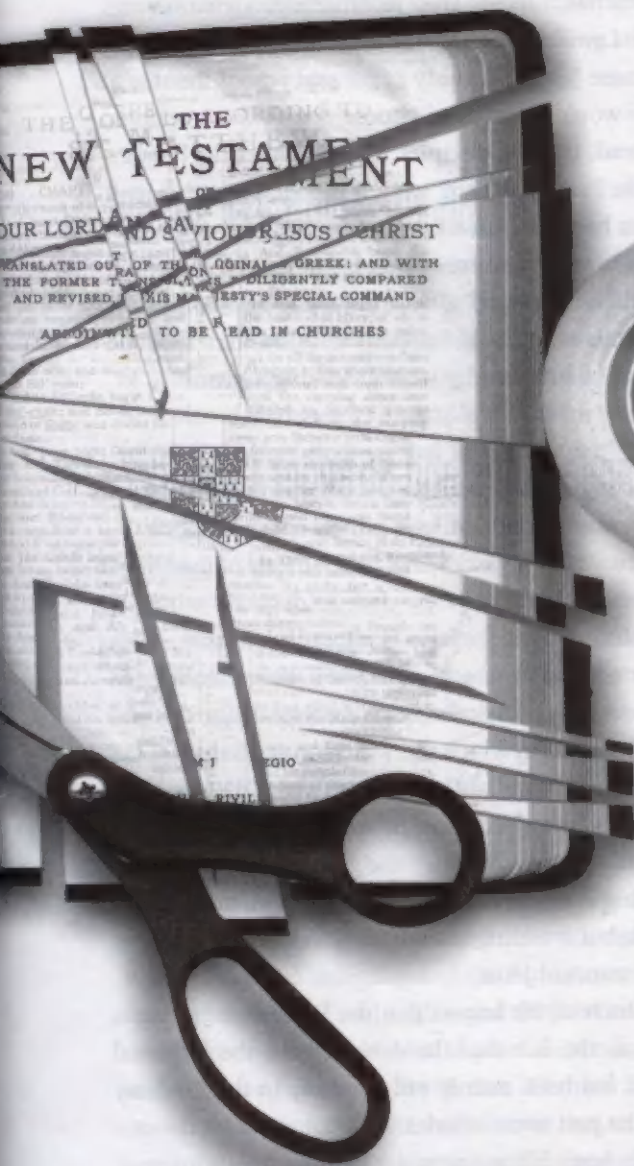
By John Moore

Everyone who comes to me and pays attention to my words and acts on them—I'll show you what such a person is like: That one is like a person building a house, who dug deep and laid the foundation on bedrock; when a flood came, the torrent slammed against that house, but could not shake it, because it was well built.—Gospel of Luke, 6:47-48 (Scholar's Version — black: "Jesus did not say this")

[The Jesus Seminar] is either the greatest scholarly hoax since the Piltdown man, or the utter bankruptcy of New Testament studies — I hope the former.—Jacob Neusner¹



his past Easter season, readers in North America, and around the world, were treated to a triple barrel salute to the "quest for the historical Jesus" by the editors of *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News & World Report*. The cover stories for the Easter week editions of all three of these media titans featured the work of the "Jesus Seminar", a group of liberal New Testament scholars who have banded together in the interest of bringing the popular understanding of Jesus out of the "dark ages" and into the light of modern liberal criticism. The brainchild of Robert Funk, formerly of the University of Montana, now presiding over the Westar Institute in Sonoma, California, the Jesus Seminar has as its goal the task of bringing the 'findings' of modern biblical criticism over the last two centuries out of the closet of the academy and into the



public square — through the power of the mass media. In this, they appear to be succeeding wildly.

The result of this unprecedented experiment has been much confusion. A marketplace saturated with the feel-good theo-losophies of such luminaries as Oprah and Bill, and fed the bulk of its "christian" theological diet by the televangelists, is suddenly now dealing with the pronouncements, by qualified 'gospel experts', that Jesus never claimed to be God, that only 18% of the words attributed to him in the New Testament are actually his, that the rest was invented by over-zealous disciples crazed at the agony of losing their messiah and intent on continuing a movement that he never started. The real Jesus, the

"historical Jesus", says the Seminar, is a person who was the inspiration behind the mythical Jesus of the New Testament, but who bears little actual resemblance to the "Christ of creed and dogma" taught by the church today. Could these things be true? In a world where a substantial portion of the population doesn't know, as was said of ancient Ninevah, "their right hand from there left", the answer is: "anything could be true".

In its flagship publication from 1993, *The Five Gospels, The Search for the Authentic*

Words of Jesus the Seminar has simultaneously performed an ideological cleansing of the words of Jesus found in the Gospels and elevated the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* as a co-equal in authority with the four canonical Gospels. Meeting since 1985 in a series of biennial voting sessions, the "Fellows" of the Seminar have cast their now famous colored beads to determine the authenticity of virtually every saying of Jesus recorded in the Gospels, and the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*. Each saying is thereby assigned a color: red—Jesus said this; pink—Jesus probably said something like this; grey—Jesus did not say this but the ideas are close to his own; black—Jesus did not say this, it represents the perspective of a later or different tradition. Through this scientific process, the Seminar has determined that only 18% of the words ascribed to Jesus are actually his or close to his (red or pink). In other words, using a red-letter edition of the Gospels as the basis, after the Seminar has applied its filtering process, only 18% of the red text remains red, or almost red. The entire Gospel of John is black! What is left after the Seminar is through is a kind of secular Jewish sage, a theologically neutered Jesus who wouldn't cause much of a stir at a faculty get-together.

The Seminar's Jesus lived in a virtual theological vacuum: he never quoted a word of the Law or Prophets or referred to any of the eschatological (end of time, last days) ideas rampant in Palestine in the first century. He certainly never referred to himself as the Christ, or made any predictions about his death or resurrection, never called any followers, never

talked about the coming Kingdom of God, or the final judgement. Jesus' 'philosophical' ideas were probably

"Jesus' followers did not grasp the subtleties of his position and reverted, once Jesus was not there to remind them, to the view they had learned from John the Baptist." (Funk, Hoover, et al., 1993; p.4)

shaped more by his contact with the itinerant Cynic sages who "probably" wandered through first century Palestine (unattested in any actual historical sources), than with the Judaism others have naively taken to be the foundation for Jesus' message.³ Neither he nor his disciples (whom he hadn't called) ever had any arguments with Pharisees. He had no institutional goals; it was his disciples who created the commandment to go into all the world carrying a gospel message that they had largely constructed themselves. In short, Jesus never did much of any-

thing, except for spin out aphorisms and parables in unitized, laconic sound-bites. His sayings do, says the Seminar, charitably, "cut against the social and religious grain" and "characteristically call for a reversal of roles or frustrate ordinary, everyday expectations." (p. 31) For these things he was crucified.

How did the church arrive at such a wrong-headed picture of the man from Galilee? According to the Seminar, the blame can be laid at the feet of the earliest disciples:

Jesus' followers did not grasp the subtleties of his position and reverted, once Jesus was not there to remind them, to the view they had learned from John the Baptist. As a consequence of this reversion . . . the gospel writers overlaid the tradition of sayings and parables with their own "memories" of Jesus. (Funk, Hoover, et al., 1993; p.4)

According to the Seminar, the disciples had very poor "memories" indeed. So much so, that 82% of their memories of Jesus, as recorded in the Gospels, is more or less a pure fiction. This claim seems hardly believable, absent other factors — such as a desire on the part of the disciples to "remember" sayings in accord with their own theology, which differed radically from Jesus' own. Which, of course, is exactly what the Seminar is claiming. *The Five Gospels* is, then, an effort to rescue the true picture of Jesus from

the "firm grip of those whose faith overpowered their memories." (p.4) This reconstruction circumvents C.S. Lewis' famous "Lunatic, Liar, or Lord" dilemma, because Jesus obviously never said any of the things that would force us to choose one of these options. Instead, it is the disciples who are either the lunatics or the liars; the "Lord" option is gone altogether, and Jesus becomes just the witty peasant sage of Galilee. Or better, he becomes Brian from the Monty Python film "Life of Brian," a first century Jew who, through no fault of his own, happens to fulfill the messianic hopes of a nation desperately seeking a savior.

Strange Rules and Stranger Gospels

Beware of finding a Jesus entirely congenial to you.

—Jesus Seminar's final general "Rule of Evidence" (Funk et.al., 1993; p.5)

Most of what the Jesus Seminar has to say is, by its own admission, not anything new. By presenting the various source theories (e.g., theories about the oral traditions from which the written gospels derive) the relationship and differences between the Synoptic Gospels, the distinction between the Synoptics and the Gospel of John, etc., the Jesus Seminar is introducing new ideas into the mainstream media, perhaps, but is adding nothing at all to scholarship about the historical Jesus.

Much of the impact that the Seminar is having is due to the fact that the debate about the historical Jesus has been mainly hidden away in the academy for the past two centuries, although its effect has certainly been felt in the wider culture. The Seminar is presenting a de-nuanced and, as we shall proceed to claim, extremely biased version of the debate. But compared to the dismal level of 'teachings' about the Bible generally seen in the media, the Seminar's views seem in comparison to have the ring of academic truth-seeking.

What is distinctive about the Seminar's "scholarship" is its 'authoritative' disqualification of so much of the Gospel record. The other distinctive feature is the Seminar's curious proclamation of the authority and early date of the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas*, a (by most accounts) second-century gnostic document, of which a fourth century copy was discovered just this century in a famous archeological find at Nag Hamadi in Egypt. In what follows, we will take a look at the

methodology the Seminar uses to reach its unique findings, and at its ever-so special handling of the *Gospel of Thomas*.

Pillars and Rules of Evidence

The Seminar credits several guidelines as the foundation for its search for truth.³ These guidelines are broken into two main categories—the “Seven Pillars of Scholarly Wisdom” (I kid you not), and a long list of “Rules of Evidence.” The first four of the seven “pillars” are standard findings that liberal scholarship has drawn from the biblical criticism of the past two centuries. These are: (1) the belief in a “historical Jesus” as distinct from the Jesus of the Gospels; (2) the belief that the Synoptic Gospels are closer to the historical Jesus than is the Gospel of John; (3) the view that Mark was written prior to Matthew and Luke; and (4) the identification of the hypothetical sayings source Q.⁴ Actually, numbers 2, 3 and 4 of this list are assumed by most modern scholars, not just liberal scholars.

Pillars 5, 6, and 7, however, are much more idiosyncratic in nature. These are: (5) liberation of the non-eschatological Jesus from Schweitzer’s eschatological Jesus; (6) recognition of the fundamental difference between the oral culture and the print culture; and (7) reversal of the burden of proof—the Gospels are presumed false until proven true. Number 5 is an important but somewhat technical issue that must be understood in the broader context of the overall history of the “quest.” See the related article in this issue, “The Quest for the Historical Jesus—An Overview,” for a look at the history of the “quest” and how the Jesus Seminar fits into the broader picture. In a nutshell, pillar 5 is an attempt to ‘liberate’ Jesus of his views that the end of the age would come, and with it the fiery day of God’s wrath. Number 6 is true, of course, in a general sense, but the Seminar has taken this theory to extremes in order to justify one of their main premises, the theory that Jesus’ disciples had such poor powers of recollection. And number 7 is simply a matter of presumption.

In addition to the seven pillars, The Jesus Seminar formulates certain “rules of evidence” and pledges to apply these purportedly objective standards to each

phrase in the Gospels in order to arrive at a reliable chronicle of Jesus’ sayings. These rules of evidence are laid-out in a manner that gives a formalistic faux-legal patina to the Seminar’s evaluatory process. They state that their rules are functionally the same as rules of evidence used in a court of law and point out that they are rules derived from two centuries of biblical scholarship. (p.16) However, the Jesus Seminar’s rules of evidence are not so much criteria for evaluating the reliability of statements as they are foregone conclusions about the way the gospels were written combined with unabashed assumptions about the Jesus they plan to reconstruct. In fact, the Seminar employs a methodology so obviously circular in its logic, so dependent on questionable presuppositions, that one observer writes:

The structure of this “intellectual” process is pitifully simple: Assume that Jesus was not divine, and exclude from the historical record—the only one we have by the way—everything that suggests that He thought He was. What’s left? Why the very thing you assumed in order to prove the thing you set out to find. I don’t let freshman get away with this in a blue-book examination. (Davis, 1996; p.23)

Rules of evidence used in a court of law are, primarily, rules used to exclude certain types of evidence from the decision-making process because they are deemed unreliable, tainted or inherently prejudicial. For instance hearsay evidence (any statement made out of court) is excluded because of the problems in verifying the truth of these sorts of statements. Of course there are myriad exceptions to the hearsay rule, e.g., admissions of guilt made out of court are deemed reliable and, therefore, admissible because people do not tend to lie when they make statements that hurt rather than help them. A similar rule that has been applied to the New Testament by certain biblical scholars is that the writers of the gospels would not attribute a statement to Jesus that would make their lives more difficult unless it were an authentic saying and, therefore, we can conclude that the “hard” sayings of Jesus—such as his teachings on divorce—are authentic and reliable.

However, the rules used by the Seminar do not provide guidelines or criteria for evaluating the authenticity of statements; instead, they are assumptions in the guise of truisms that Jesus never claimed

to be the messiah, could not possibly have been prophetic and, ad nauseam, the assumption that the gospel authors simply must have made some things up. Included among the rules are the following:

The evangelists frequently attribute their own statements to Jesus. (p.23)

Sayings and parables expressed in "Christian" language are the creation of the evangelists or their Christian predecessors. (p.24)

Sayings and narratives that reflect knowledge of events that took place after Jesus' death are the creation of the evangelists or the oral tradition before them. (p.25)

Jesus makes no claim to be the Anointed, the messiah. (p.32)

As an example of how the rules work, consider a passage from the "little apocalypse" of Mark 13, (Text is from the Seminar's own "Scholars' Version," "SV", for the sake of argument):

And Jesus would say to them, "Stay alert, otherwise someone might just delude you! You know, many will come using my name and claim, 'I'm the one!' and they will delude many people. When you hear of wars and rumors of wars, don't be afraid. These are inevitable, but it is not yet the end. For nation will rise up against nation and empire against empire; there will be earthquakes everywhere; there will be famines. These things mark the beginning of the final agonies."—Mark 13:5-8, Scholars' Version (black)

This passage is disallowed on the basis that it has a "striking correspondence" to writings of Josephus describing events leading up to the Judean-Roman war of 66-70 A.D. (p.109) Having disqualified the passage on the basis of plagiarism, the Seminar goes on, curiously, to conclude that the sayings are either based on the "traditional apocalyptic materials" (oral tradition) or they may be "descriptions after the fact" (created by the evangelist). In any case, they didn't originate with Jesus. (p.110) The third rule of evidence listed above has obviously been a useful tool in reaching this conclusion. It is not possible, of course, that these were prophetic words spoken by Jesus because they speak of things that happen after his death.

What is going on here? These "rules" may represent *conclusions*, or '*findings*', that someone might arrive at after studying the texts. But to represent

these assumptions as "rules of evidence" is disingenuous in the extreme. Is it possible that the Fellows of the Jesus Seminar are simply guilty of a semantic mistake, that they have confused rules of evidence with prior assumptions, or that they are unaware of the problems this creates for their methodology? This seems very unlikely; for whatever else one might say about the Jesus Seminar, it must be acknowledged that almost a dozen of the world's leading New Testament scholars are found in its ranks, including co-founders Robert Funk and J. Dominic Crossan (*The Historical Jesus*, 1991), and Marcus Borg (*Jesus: A New Vision*, 1987). These people are not unaware of what they are doing.

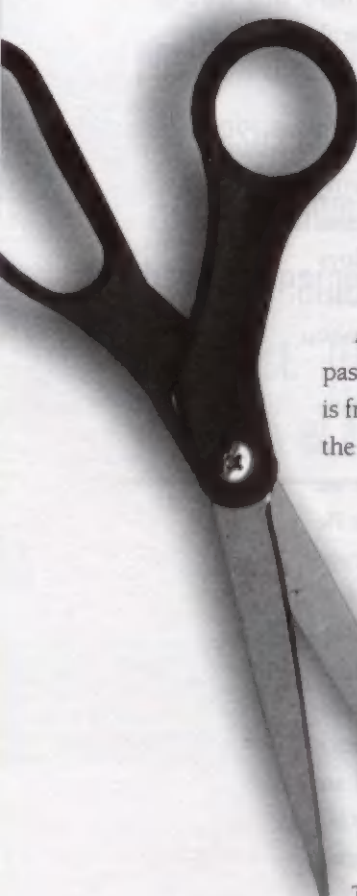
We will recall then, that *The Five Gospels* was not written for a scholarly audience, but for a lay audience, an audience that presumably would not be keenly aware of the problem of stating what you are going to find, and then finding it. The battlefield that *The Five Gospels* is designed to win is not the minutiae oriented world of Biblical scholarship, but the wave-tossed world of popular perception, common wisdom. In the world of Biblical criticism, *The Five Gospels* may be something of a joke. But in the winner-take-all struggle for the mind of the culture, it is a potent effector, a voice speaking "amazing things" that cannot easily be refuted by the same type of bite-sized media bombs that it uses to such effect. The Seminar has proved itself to be master of the media, and the media has proved itself to be peculiarly amenable to the message the Seminar has to bring.

Ultimately, the Seminar ignores its own "final general rule of evidence: Beware of finding a Jesus that is entirely congenial to you." (Funk et al., 1993; p.5)

The Elevation of Thomas

The other distinctive of *The Five Gospels* is its curious elevation of the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* to the same status as that of the canonical Gospels. A fourth century copy of the *Gospel of Thomas* was discovered shortly after World War II as part of a collection of mainly gnostic documents found at Nag Hamadi, in Egypt. *Thomas* is one of the documents discovered at Nag Hamadi that were for centuries known only by their titles, due to the warnings against them found in writings of the early church fathers.

Gnosticism is an ancient philosophy, exact origins



unknown, which was widespread in the Middle-East in the early centuries of the first millennium A.D.. Gnosticism was extremely mutagenic, adapting itself to belief systems of various kinds, and in the process creating multiple different strands of itself — all of which had in common at the least a dualism between the material and immaterial worlds. In the gnostic conception, the material world was evil, and material existence an illusion which kept some of those living in the world from discovering their true natures as 'sparks' of the divine flame. In this conception, the gnostics had many interesting parallels with the Docetists, another ancient heretical faction, who also believed in the intrinsically evil nature of the material world, and therefore concluded that Jesus had only "appeared" (Greek "dokein") to take on a fleshly body.

Somehow, according to the strains of 'purest' gnosticism, some of those living in the material world had within themselves the divine nature of the true god, but had become trapped in the world of material illusion. The role of gnosis (Greek for 'knowledge') was to wake up the sleepers, and help them escape back to their home in the world of the spirit where they would reunite with the godhead. Gnosticism, adaptable and mutagenic as it was, flourished like a weed in the fertile soil of the early Christian communities, and had to be stamped out repeatedly and forcefully over the course of several centuries. As a threat to Christianity, it probably reached its peak in the late 2nd-Century, but traces of incipient gnostic influence can already be seen in the heretical doctrines that Paul is battling in his first letter to the Corinthians (circa A.D. 56). By the time of Paul's first letter to Timothy, circa A.D. 61-63, the threat has become fully manifest:

O Timothy! Guard what was committed to your trust, avoiding the profane and idle babble of what is falsely called *knowledge* . . . (1 Timothy 6:20, Gk. 'gnosis')

Thomas represents an advanced state of Christian-Gnostic hybridization. As Craig L. Blomberg, writing in the first chapter of *Jesus Under Fire* summarizes the contents: roughly one-third of the sayings in the *Gospel of Thomas* are clearly gnostic in nature, between one-third and one-half are paralleled fairly closely in Matthew, Mark, Luke, or John, and the remaining sayings are not demonstrably unorthodox

but could lend themselves to gnostic interpretations.³ As an example, here is a "saying" from *Thomas*, apparently a corruption of the confession of Peter of Jesus as the Messiah (see Matthew 16:13-20), in which the apostle Thomas receives a secret revelation:

Jesus says to his disciples: "Compare me, and tell me whom I am like." Simon Peter says to him: "Thou art like a just angel." Matthew says to him: "Thou art like a wise man and a philosopher!" Thomas says to him: "Master, my tongue cannot find words to say whom thou art like." Jesus says: "I am no longer thy master; for thou hast drunk, thou art inebriated from the bubbling spring which is mine and which I sent forth." Then he took him aside; he said three words to him. And when Thomas came back to his companions, they asked him: "What did Jesus say to thee?" And Thomas answered them: "If I tell you (a single) one of the words he said to me, you will take up stones and throw them at me, and fire will come out of the stones and consume you!" (Gospel of Thomas, 14)⁶

Thomas, alone of the disciples, discerns correctly that the master is beyond description (beyond comprehension). For this, he is rewarded with recognition of his equal footing with Jesus, and with a secret word, for which the other disciples are not yet ready, or perhaps not capable of hearing. The elitism of gnosticism, and its 'secret' nature, are evident.

While it has been overshadowed by the furor that erupted over the Seminar's word-coloring scheme, the inclusion of the *Gospel of Thomas* in *The Five Gospels* was the Seminar's own stated primary reason for issuing the work:

Foremost among the reasons for a fresh translation is the discovery of the *Gospel of Thomas*. The scholars responsible for the Scholars Version determined that *Thomas had to be included in any primary collection of gospels*. (Funk et al., 1993; p. xiii, emphasis added)

The other distinctive of The Five Gospels is its curious elevation of the gnostic Gospel of Thomas to the same status as that of the canonical Gospels.

To justify this claim, the Seminar has come up with a unique dating scheme, largely or perhaps exclusively the work of Crossan's, that asserts a hypothetical early version of *Thomas* appearing around A.D. 55. This puts the earliest 'layer' of *Thomas* as a contemporary of Q, and about fifteen or so years antecedent to the Gospel of Mark, which the Seminar assumes to have been written around A.D. 70. The implication of this dating scheme is that *Thomas* becomes the oldest existing Christian text, which give it great claims to recording the earliest Christian beliefs, if not the purest form of Jesus' original teaching, that we have on record.⁷

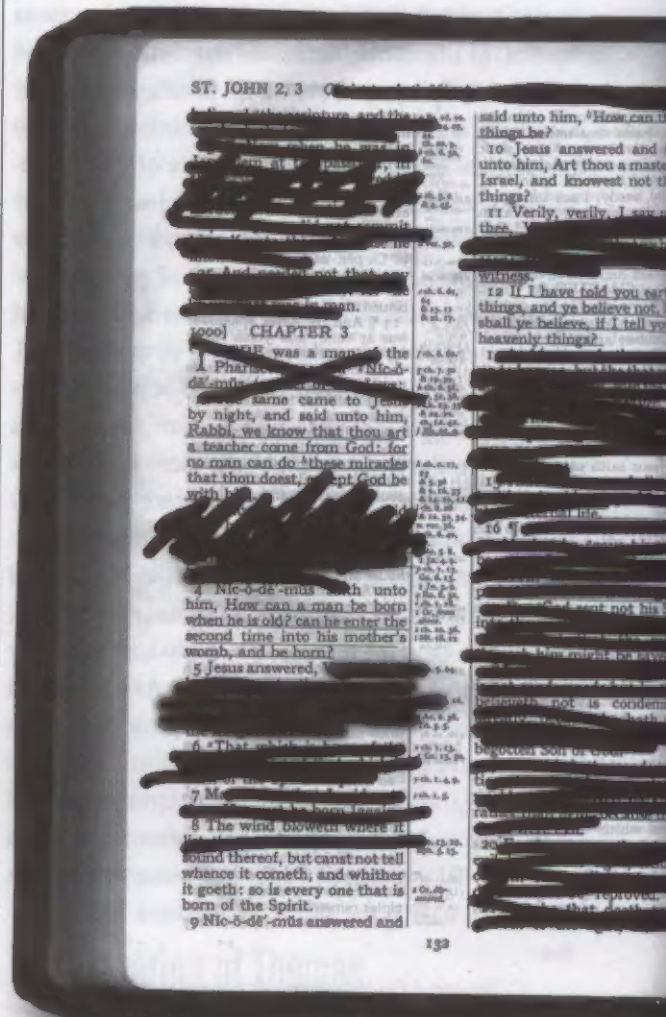
This dating scheme "sets on its head" the rest of the academic world, which dates *Thomas* to the late 2nd-century, where it fits quite nicely into a general proliferation of Gnostic writing. Craig L. Blomberg lists several reasons why *Thomas* is generally given the later date. I will only list the first (which would seem to be enough) which is that *Thomas* contains parallels to material found in all four of the canonical Gospels, including every "layer" of the Gospel tradition. That is to say, it has parallels to material found in common in all three of the Synoptic Gospels (the "triple tradition"), material found in 'Q' (material common to Matthew and Luke but not found in Mark), and traditions unique to all four Gospels, including John. Under standard source theory, this would mean that the writer of *Thomas* would have to have had access to all five of the separate streams of the earliest tradition: Mark, Q, special Matthew, special Luke, and some hypothetical source behind John. This is not very probable, even if we allow the existence of all the hypothetical sources. What is much more probable is that the writer of *Thomas* simply had access to this material after it had already appeared in the canonical Gospels, which makes a 2nd-century date very plausible. It should be noted that there is no actual historical evidence of any kind that would allow pushing the date of *Thomas* to earlier than around A.D. 150.

Why does the Seminar go to such great lengths and contortions of logic on behalf of *Thomas*? Because the theory of an early *Thomas* does a great number of things on behalf of the Seminar's theological agenda. Among them:

Looks like Q: *Thomas* looks a lot like the hypothetical Q — it is a collection of sayings without any narrative elements. An early *Thomas* adds credibility to

the view that Q existed, and that it existed as a completed work as opposed to a simple collection of sayings that was never intended to circulate as an independent source.

Stripped down Gospel: *Thomas* contains no accounts of Jesus birth, miracles, death, or resurrection. If *Thomas* is the earliest gospel, then this is evidence that these elements of the Gospels were added later.



Non-historical: *Thomas* contains only sayings; there is no historical context. An early *Thomas* would be evidence that the earliest tradition was not interested in recording factual historical details about Jesus and his ministry. Therefore, the supposed historical details of the canonical Gospels were tacked on later.

De-eschatologizing of the Gospel: *Thomas* contains no eschatological sayings. If it is early, this is evidence

that the eschatology in Jesus' message was tacked on later. This is perhaps the biggest theological axe the Seminar has to grind.

Multiple Gospel Types: Crossan, co-founder of the Seminar, likes to promote the theory that there were orthodox and gnostic gospels vying for supremacy in the early church. As a result of the political clout it

evidence that the gnostics were a heretical parasite of the early church, not interested in the historical details of Jesus' life, but only in the "gnosis" that they might wring out of his teaching.

The Oldest Quest

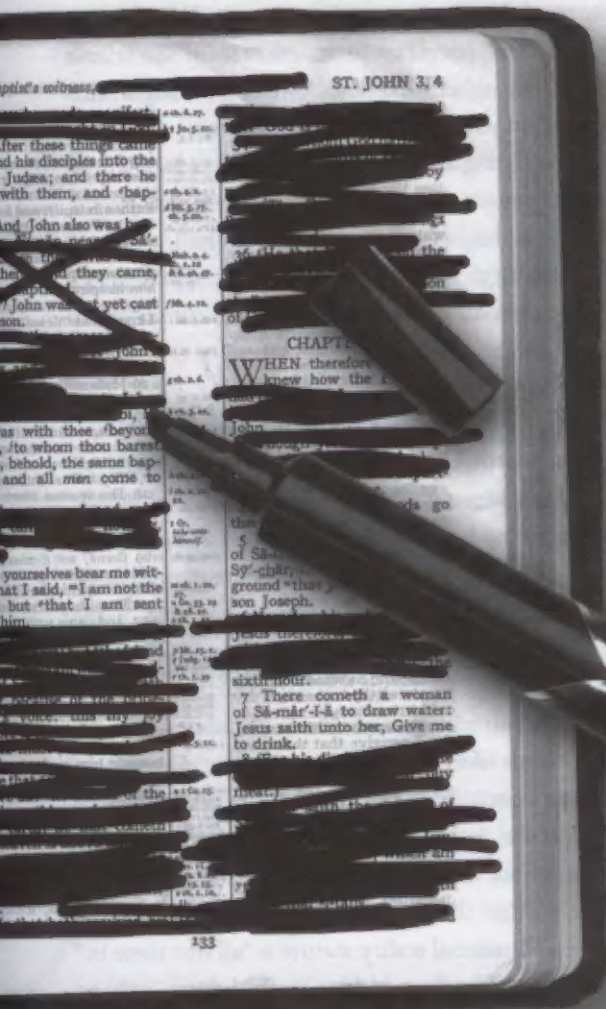
The Jesus Seminar is just the latest chapter in a tale of skeptical criticism known as the "quest for the historical Jesus." (See the related article in this issue for an overview of the history of the "quest" and the Seminar's place in it.) The "quest" was spawned out of the skeptical naturalism of the enlightenment, and its basic disbelief in the miraculous—the ability of God to intervene in the affairs of the material world. Taking as its starting point the premise that the 'true' Jesus of history had been obscured by the creed and dogma of the church, the "quest" wound through the 19th and 20th-centuries, becoming ever more existential in its beliefs about the "truth" of Scripture. The 19th-century leg of the "quest" was almost exclusively a product of German scholarship. This "First Quest" ended with Albert Schweitzer's *The Quest for the Historical Jesus* (1906), which effectively proved that 'Jesus' of the First Quest was simply a projection of the ideological biases of the scholars who were seeking him.

After this discouragement, and a period known as the "No Quest," the "quest" resumed after World War II, fortified with new tools of 'higher' criticism. This 'New Quest' has added to the rational skepticism of the First Quest its own 20th-century doubts about objective reality. Under the 'new meaning,' all truth must be assumed to be a function of the perceiver. We all come to reality with our own "buckets;" we all interpret our world according to our own "situation in life" ("situation in life"), and our view of reality is therefore unavoidably compromised. No one can positively define objective reality, if such a thing exists. Such ideas were simply the embarrassing naiveté of former generations.

With this lineage in mind, it is not difficult to understand how Funk and company have come to their reductionist conclusions. The Seminar's own

was able to command, the orthodox view prevailed, and thus became the 'orthodox' position.⁸ This position is unattested by any actual historical evidence. An early *Thomas* would be evidence that early gnostic gospels did, in fact, exist.

On the other hand, if the *Gospel of Thomas* is a 2nd-century document, then it is simply additional



'sitz im Leben' is probably summed up by their 7th "Pillar of Scholarly Wisdom:" the Gospel records are presumed to be false until "proven" true. The question of how the casting of colored beads in a bucket 'proves' anything is beside the point; what has taken place here is a complete reversal of the authority of Scripture. The Seminar has followed the 20th-century "hermeneutic of suspicion" to its logical conclusion: nothing is true, and everything is true. Truth is something waiting to be defined.

The Jesus Seminar is not, however, the first group to undertake a search for Jesus on such premises. There is another group to whom "nothing is as it seems," for whom the supposed reality of the external world requires careful and complicated sifting in order to discern the threads of truth buried beneath the layers of illusion. Long before the Jesus Seminar appeared, long before the 19th-century First Quest or the Enlightenment even, this group embarked on a project to liberate the 'true' Jesus from the distorting confines of orthodox belief. I am referring, of course, to the gnostics. I could just as easily be talking about the Docetists, or the Manicheans, or any one of a number of other virulently dualistic ancient heresies. But since it is the gnostic *Gospel of Thomas* that the Jesus Seminar is attempting to rehabilitate, it is the gnostics who now take center stage.

During the second century in particular, the gnostics produced a multitude of 'gospels' in an effort to present the true picture of Jesus, a picture informed by the esoteric knowledge that was required to truly understand his life and mission. That these gospels were composed largely of imaginary (mythic) episodes in the lives of famous apostles was not of concern to the gnostic believers. Truth was spiritual in nature in the gnostic conception, the material world an illusion; so liberties taken in the realm of the material were of little consequence or meaning. What mattered to the gnostics, after all, was not faith based on a historical figure, but knowledge delivered by a heavenly messenger. The actual historical details were mainly superfluous, as attested by the fairy-tale type nature of the bulk of the gnostic gospels, such as the *Gospel of Peter*, or by the complete lack of historical detail in the *Gospel of Thomas*. The gnostics arrived at the conclusion that it was Jesus' "true" words that mattered, not the supposed details of his life, long before the modern "quest" came to that same conclu-

sion.

This "Oldest Quest" to redefine the true Jesus has been forced underground at various times through the long centuries, but it never completely dies out. Instead, like some spiritual virus directly coded into the human soul, it lies dormant for generations, only to spring up in diverse times and places, creating theological havoc and ruin. One recent notorious example would be the Branch Davidians, whose secret teachings have survived the Waco inferno, and are now available for true seekers on the World Wide Web. Even a superficial perusal will show the telltale signs, the spaghetti-like logic twisting through yards and yards of Old and New Testament texts, all words and ideas being bent beyond recognition by the esoteric refraction of some hidden prism. Be careful, warns the web site: those who have had access to these teachings will be held eternally responsible for either responding to, or ignoring its summons to deeper things.

Gnosticism and Modernism

Modernism, as Phillip Johnson likes to point out, is the reigning belief system of our age. It is a combination of what Johnson calls *atheistic naturalism* and *liberal rationalism*, both of which came out of the Enlightenment's exaltation of human reason as the final measure of all things.

Gnosticism and modernism would appear to be at the two ends of the world view spectrum. Gnosticism posits a material world that is illusion, while the true world is the world of the spirit. Naturalistic modernism, on the other hand, concerns itself with knowing only those things that can be known within the confines of material reality; nature is "all that there is." Gnosticism looks for a hidden truth that can only be discerned by the elite few. Modernism, at least the 19th-century variety, looks for an open truth that is equally revealed to all in the natural world.

Beyond these and other very substantial differences, however, there is at least one very interesting way in which modernism and gnosticism are not so grossly incompatible. Both lead to a radical dualism between the material and the immaterial. Gnosticism, of course, views the material world as evil, and inferior. Naturalism views the material world as "all that there is," and regards everything else as "immaterial."

These dualisms cut in opposite directions, of course. But the essential nature of a divided universe is established in both. It is only a matter of switching the priorities of modernism from the material to the immaterial, as we see happening in "post modernism," to bring it into essential alignment with the gnostic world-view.

The modernism we know today is not the naively confident rationalist modernism of the 19th-century, however. It is a bruised and battered modernism that is not nearly so sure about reality as it used to be. Those in the halls of science cling to the old view of things. But outside the halls, and even within (chaos theorists for example), there are many who are not sure about the nature of objective reality, or that there is such a thing. The intellectual world-view of the late 20th-century is a curious mix of the definite and the amorphous, iron and the clay. We have to come too far and rely too heavily on technology to deny that science is a wonderful tool, but we are no longer confident enough in the absolutism on which it is based to declare right and wrong, truth and error, beauty and perversity. Modernism has painted itself into an epistemological corner, and the only way out is to jump from the rational into . . . the irrational.

Deeper Knowledge

I have argued against the kind of "historical reductionism" that says that something must be historically true to be true. To use an example, I regularly say, "I don't think the virgin birth happened, but I think the stories of the virgin birth are powerfully true." — Marcus Borg of the Jesus Seminar⁹

The "death of God" proclaimed in the 19th-century was perhaps an inevitable end-product of the Enlightenment. It represents the uncontrolled desire of man to be bound by nothing outside his own reason. Ironically, as Phillip Johnson shows in his book *Reason in the Balance* (Johnson 1995), this desperate attempt to liberate reason from the shackles of 'superstition' leads inexorably to the end of reason itself.

Some of the early outer workings of this death of reason were noted by Albert Schweitzer, who pointed out the essential flaws in the modernist criticism of the 19th-century German "First Quest." Schweitzer

pointed out that the supposedly 'objective' scholarship of the First Quest was in fact producing pictures of the "historical Jesus" that were remarkably conformed to the ideologies of the scholars who were doing the work. Rudolph Bultmann, who presided over the cleanup of this embarrassment to modernist criticism, came up with the reason: the true historical Jesus was beyond recovery because the earliest chroniclers were not interested in preserving true historical records. In fact, said Bultmann, the earliest Christians

**I have argued against the kind of
"historical reductionism" that says that
something must be historically true to be
true. To use an example, I regularly say, "I
don't think the virgin birth happened, but I
think the stories of the virgin birth are
powerfully true." — Marcus Borg**

had created myths according to their own messianic desires. Bultmann was far from done, however. As his crowning achievement, Bultmann provided the true interpretation of Jesus: the true Christ, the Christ of faith, was the Christ that the church had invented and canonized in its officially sanctioned book of myths, the New Testament.

The epistemological crisis of 20th-century biblical criticism is part of, or perhaps the precipitator of, the larger crisis of modernism in this century. As a result of this crisis, the modernist concept of truth has been disfigured beyond recognition. The classical beliefs about truth have, in fact, been declared dead, along with God. In their place are a set of assumptions that define a kind of relativistic truth: all truth is conditioned by its source, all truth is a function of the one who believes it to be true. We can therefore be skeptical, say the modern lights, about any claims of an objective or universal truth (such as the claim that

"Jesus is Lord").

If these things are assumed to be *true* (How does one do this?, one might wonder), the question is how to go on from here. The conundrum of post-modernism is how to get beyond reason. Increasingly, it seems, the intellectual elite of the West believe they have found answers that supersede the boundaries of rationalistic reason; answers that have interesting parallels in the belief systems of the East, such as Hinduism or Bhuddism. These beliefs have long-standing traditions of viewing reason as inferior to man's spiritual nature in its ability to discern true reality.

This exaltation of the intuitive/spiritual and devaluation of the rational/material is a trait shared by the gnostics as well, of course. Is such a view at the helm of the Jesus Seminar? I believe the answer is 'yes' (at least in part) for reasons we have already discussed:

1. The Seminar's methodology involves highly circular reasoning — a fact for which they make no apology. In fact, in a play of purechutzpa, the Seminar describes their work in long-winded, superficial detail with rhetoric that employs all the trappings of academic objectivity. Perhaps the Seminar is intentionally trying to delude the lay reader (probable) by erecting the academic facade (trust us, we are the 'gospel experts'). Or perhaps the Seminar has a supra-rational (i.e., esoteric) basis for defending their methodology that they feel would be too difficult for the average reader to comprehend, so they clothe their methods in the garb of standard rationalism.

2. The Seminar is pulling out all the stops in an effort to re-habilitate the "non-apocalyptic" 'Jesus' that appeared in much of the First Quest, but after Schweitzer has been much more rarely seen. The eschatology in Jesus' message is anathema to those who hold the view that "God is dead." Eschatology involves an end of time, final judgement, accountability to a creator. These things are an affront to the modern mind which sees itself as the final arbiter of all things. Perhaps the Seminar is willing to abandon the foundation of rationalism if that will allow them to also leave behind the inevitable eschatology of Jesus' message.

3. The Seminar is going to great lengths to resurrect the ancient *Gospel of Thomas*, and with it the beliefs of the ancient heresy of gnosticism. Gnosticism, as a belief system, is much more amenable to post-modernism than it is to classic modernism. This elevation

of *Thomas* may just be a side-effect of the Seminar's overall project to 'de-bunk' the authority Gospels, allowing the Seminar to establish its own picture of the 'true' Jesus. But it may also be that the Seminar feels the heresies promoted in *Thomas* are more in line with reality than they see it than are the canonical Gospels.

In addition to these speculative reasons, there are the actual statements of Seminar Fellows, which, although not made on behalf of the Seminar itself, can probably be relied on to give a fairly good sense of what is going on "under the hood" at the Seminar. One example is the statement of Marcus Borg quoted at the top of this section: "I don't think the virgin birth happened, but I think the stories of the virgin birth are powerfully true." Borg obviously holds a view of reality that is not bounded by historical events. According to Borg, and the gnostics before him, it is not the flesh and blood drama that is played out in the hours, minutes and seconds of our material existence that determines reality. It is some 'spiritual' truth, independent of such material mundanities, that determines what is true.

As one other example, consider Crossan's beliefs about the resurrection. Crossan does not believe in a physical resurrection (of course; this is a given). Rather, Crossan believes that Jesus was buried in a shallow grave and 'probably' eaten by dogs.¹⁰ How does this historical scholar arrive at this amazing conclusion? Without a shred of any kind of historical evidence. There is no such tradition, in any kind of literature, regardless of how heretical. Obviously, Crossan is privy to a source of information that is not confined to the natural realm. And in these last days of the 20th-century, he is not too shy to share these things with us, these small pebbles of "scholarly gnosis."

These Things Are True

Then God saw everything that He had made, and indeed it was very good (Genesis 1:31)

The Bible does not give us the option of dualism; not unless we are willing to stoop to the level of blasphemy of the ancient gnostics, and split the Godhead into the "gods" of the Old and New Testament, making the Old Testament God Yahweh a bungling demiurge responsible for creating the material world. Unless we are willing to do this and discard about

82% of the statements made by and concerning Him in the New Testament, we cannot both believe in Jesus and believe that His physical, historical life was somehow unimportant, something less than absolutely, intrinsically essential.

When John recorded the words of Jesus in John 6, he was doing so, at least in part, to combat the docetic/gnostic dualism already infiltrating the church:

I am the living bread which came down from heaven. If anyone eats of this bread, he will live forever; and the bread that I shall give is My flesh, which I shall give for the life of the world. (John 6:51)

Unless you eat the flesh of the Son of Man and drink his blood you have no life in yourselves (John 6:53b)

The Greek word for "flesh" used here and throughout John 6 is "sarx," which can mean both the literal 'flesh' of 'flesh and blood' material reality, and the totality of the makeup of a human being: body, soul, and spirit. John makes one implication of this teaching of Jesus crystal clear in his first letter:

This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: Every spirit that confesses that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is of God, but every spirit that does not confess that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is not of God. And this is the spirit of the Antichrist, which you have heard was coming, and is now already in the world. (1 John 4:2-3)

The belief of the church through the past two millennia has been that the Gospels are what they purport to be — eyewitness (Matthew, John) or second generation (Mark, Luke) accounts of the life, ministry, and teaching of Jesus of Nazareth, a real person, a Jew who lived in the first century of our era. They have been regarded as accurate in their portrayal of His message, recollections of His healings and other miracles, and testament to His actual physical victory over the death which he suffered on a Roman cross. This view, which has survived the long centuries since Jesus walked the Earth, is the basis of Christian orthodoxy. To believe in the orthodox viewpoint, one must believe in God, and believe in a God who has the ability and inclination to enter into the affairs of man.

To underscore the point: the Jesus of the Gospels according to the orthodox view is a historical person, whose actions and teachings, including his miracles and resurrection from the dead, are accurately record-

ed in the four canonical Gospels.

As Christians, we have nothing to fear from *valid* historical research into the person of Jesus. As N.T. Wright, former professor of New Testament at Oxford puts it:

It's hard work, but if you stick with the historical enterprise to the bitter end, not only can you preach from it, but it's more powerful than what the Fundamentalists or the liberal reductionists offer. (Biema, 1996: p.58)

We do, however, have plenty to be concerned about with regards to the kind of historical revisionism practiced by the Jesus Seminar. The Seminar's next major project will be to issue their findings as to what Jesus *did*. No one who is familiar with the Seminar's ideology and methodology is in any doubt concerning what the central finding of this work will be: the resurrection will be the first thing to go.

Of course, attacks on the central issues of the Christian faith are nothing new. To be sure, the champions of orthodoxy have been engaged in a constant struggle for the "purity of the faith" since the very beginning. Paul's letters, for example, reflect his efforts to inoculate the earliest congregations against the doctrines of "judaizers" and gnostic/docetic influences. Paul's defense is part of what allows us to confidently assert that the teaching that Jesus was bodily resurrected from the dead has been the historic teaching of the church from its earliest point. In Paul's First Letter to the Corinthians, 1 Cor.15:3-4, he spells out the tradition that he has received, the very early creedal statement of the church:

For I delivered to you first of all that which I also received: that Christ died for our sins according to the Scriptures, and that He was buried, and that He rose again the third day according to the Scriptures, and that He was seen by Cephas, then by the twelve. (1 Cor 15:3-5)

Moreover, Paul warns the Corinthians that this gospel is the basis of their salvation:

Moreover, brethren, I declare to you the gospel which I preached to you, which also you received and in which you stand, by which also you are saved, if you hold fast that word which I preached to you—unless you believed in vain. (1 Cor.15:1-2)

Following on an analysis by Gordon D. Fee (Fee, 1987; p.716 and ff.), Paul is writing to the Corinthians to correct their disbelief in the resurrec-

tion from the dead, and their overemphasis of the charismatic, or 'pneumatic', aspects of the faith. Evidently a false theology, rooted in a radical pneumatism, had invaded the church which denied the value/significance of the body. This false theology was being expressed in an 'overrealized' or 'spiritualized' eschatology, which denied the physical resurrection of the dead. In answering this heresy, Paul makes it clear that the resurrection of Jesus is the central event of the gospel.

We preach: Christ has been raised from the dead,
Some of you say: there is no resurrection of the dead.
But if there is no resurrection of the dead, neither has
Christ been raised.

If Christ has not been raised, then both our preach-
ing and your believing are to no avail.

More than that, we are found to be false witnesses of
God, because we bore witness about God, that he
raised Christ, whom he did not raise, if indeed the
dead are not raised, for if the dead are not raised, not
even Christ has been raised. (1 Cor. 15:12-16, Fee)

Paul goes on to make it clear that we, likewise, will be
resurrected, in the same manner as our Lord, with "spir-
itual bodies" (Greek, *soma pneumatikon*, v.51). What is
a *soma pneumatika*? This is a mystery, but it involves an
aspect of physicality, a "soma." As Fee puts it:

If for Paul, and therefore for us, there is an element of
mystery to the concept of a "spiritual body" (v.51),
there can be little question that for him Christ's resur-
rection is central to everything. It is the ultimate
eschatological event.

**John Moore, SCP Associate editor, is a writer and com-
puter consultant living in Oakland with his wife and
two girls. When not working on SCP articles, John can
be found working as a consultant for the Disabled
Students Program at UC Berkeley, or hammering away
at the mysteries of the World Wide Web.**

Resources

All Scripture references NKJV unless otherwise noted.

David Van Biema (1996); "The Gospel Truth? Time, April 8, 1996,
vol.147, no.15

Adam Brooke Davis, "The Ineffectual Jesus of the Jesus Seminar," Guest
Column

in the New Oxford Review, July-August 1996

Gordon D. Fee (1987); *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Grand Rapids,
Eerdmans)

Robert W. Funk, Roy W. Hoover, and the Jesus Seminar (1993); *The Five
Gospels: The Search for the Authentic Words of Jesus* (New York,
Macmillan Publishing Company)

Marcus Borg, John Dominic Crossan, Luke Timothy Johnson (1996); "Jesus
at 2000 E-mail Debate on the Historical Jesus" (Sponsored by
HarperCollins San Francisco) <http://www.harpercollins.com/san->

[fran/2000.htm](http://www.sanfran/2000.htm)

Phillip Johnson (1995); *Reason in the Balance* (Dovers Grove, IL,
InterVarsity Press)

Howard Clark Kee (1977); *Jesus In History: An Approach to the Study of the
Gospels, Second Edition* (Harcourt Brace Janovich Publishers)

Birger A. Pearson (1995); "The Gospel According to the Jesus Seminar"
Religion (1995) 25, 317-338

Gene Edward Veith, Jr. (1994); *Postmodern Times: A Christian Guide to
Contemporary Thought and Culture* (Wheaton, IL, Crossways Books)

Michael J. Wilkins and J.P. Moreland, eds. (1995), *Jesus Under Fire*
(Grand Rapids, Zondervan Publishing House, a division of
HarperCollins Publishers) Note: I would also like to thank Rich Poll,
Research Associate for the International School of Theology, for inform-
ing me about important resource material.

Notes

¹Ostling, "Jesus Christ, Plain and Simple," p.39. As quoted in
"Jesus Under Fire," p.4.

²See, for example Robert Funk et al. (1993), *The Five
Gospels*, p.287. In a commentary on the parable of the
unshrunk cloth, Funk describes why "so many of the
Fellows are inclined to regard Jesus as a secular sage
who perhaps acquired his knowledge of common lore
from itinerant philosophers who visited Galilee while he
was growing up." Coincidentally, co-founder Crossan
posited the Cynic-sage theory in book-length form in his
1991 best-seller, *The Historical Jesus*.

³I am indebted, in this analysis, to the treatment offered by
B.A. Pearson (1995), p.322 and ff.

⁴Q, short for the German "Quelle," or "source," is a hypo-
thetical "sayings source," a document (or perhaps an oral
tradition) containing sayings of Jesus that is theorized to
be the basis for sayings common to both Matthew and
Luke that are not found in Mark. This document, if it
existed, is not known in any form—it has disappeared
from the historical record.

Craig L. Blomberg, "Where Do We Start Studying Jesus," in
eds. Wilkins and Moreland (1995); p.23.

⁵As found in Howard Clark Kee, *The Origins of Christianity,
Sources and Texts*, (Prentice Hall), 1973., p.250.

According to the Seminar's translation in *The Five
Gospels*, this is saying 13. I have used this older transla-
tion, as opposed to the Seminar's translation because
the Seminar's translation downplays somewhat the ele-
vated status that Thomas is accorded due to his 'confes-
sion.' This passage is somewhat unique in Thomas in
that it contains even a semblance of narrative action.

⁶Co-founder Crossan, in his recent work *The Historical
Jesus* (1991), lays the groundwork for this dating of
Thomas. As summarized by B.A. Pearson (1995), p.321:

Trickster like, Crossan deftly sets standard critical scholar-
ship on its head by assigning to the earliest stratum (30-
60 C.E.) such sources as the *Gospel of Thomas* (i.e. a
supposed 'first layer'), Papyrus Egerton 2, and other
papyrus fragments, and the *Gospel of the Hebrews*, writ-
ings usually assigned to the 2nd century. He even
invents a new gospel of his own which he assigns to this
period, the 'Cross Gospel', which he reconstructs out of
the 2nd-century *Gospel of Peter*.

⁷See J. Dominic Crossan, Reply — week 2, in Borg,
Crossan, Johnson (1996)

<http://www.harpercollins.com/sanfran/2c.htm>

⁸Marcus Borg, Reply — week 2, in Borg, Crossan, Johnson
(1996) <http://www.harpercollins.com/sanfran/2b.htm>

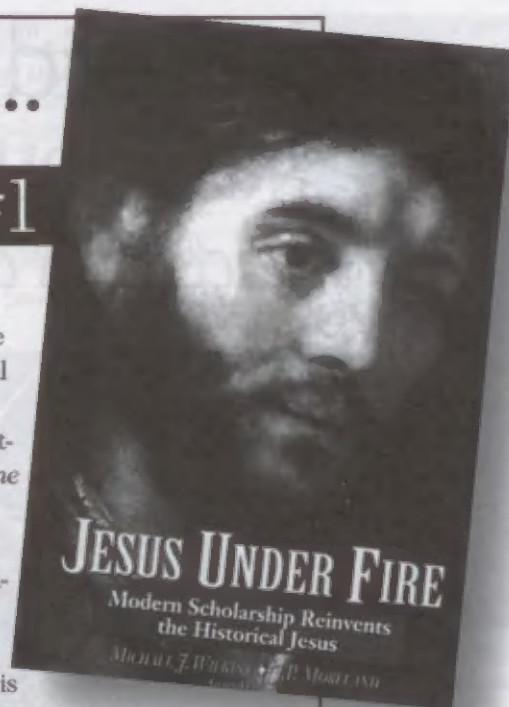
⁹Richard N. Ostling, "Jesus Christ, Plain and Simple,"
Time, 10 January 1994, 32-33, as cited in Craig, William
Lane, "Did Jesus Rise from the Dead?," in eds. Wilkins
and Moreland (1995).

FEATURING....

➤ JESUS UNDER FIRE
BY WILKINS & MORELAND

#1

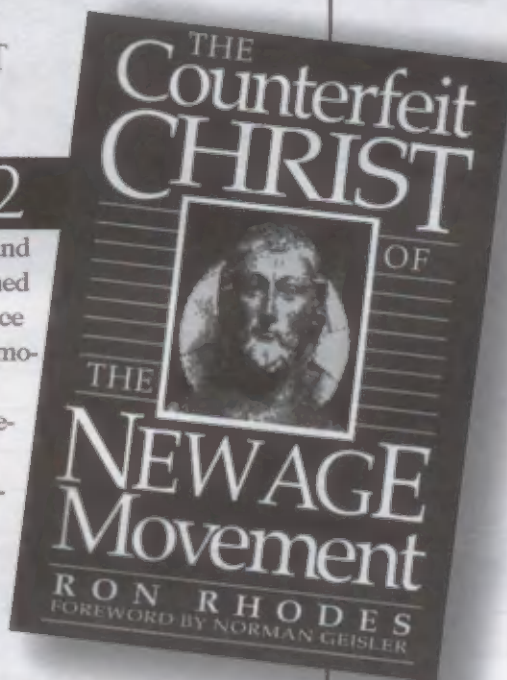
In the last few years, such questions as "Who is Jesus? What did he do? What did he say," have been the subject of scrutiny by a forum of biblical scholars called the Jesus Seminar. Their conclusions have been widely publicized and disseminated to the general public in magazines such as *Time* and *Newsweek*. Ideas that once were contained within the theological community are now being heard and accepted by many in the larger population. Combining accessibility with scholarly depth, *Jesus Under Fire* helps readers judge for themselves whether or not the Jesus of the Bible is the Jesus of history, and whether the Gospels' claim is valid that he is the only way to God.

➤ THE COUNTERFEIT CHRIST
OF OF THE NEW AGE
MOVEMENT

BY RON RHODES

#2

Suddenly we are confronted with the New Age "Cosmic Christ"—a broadminded and nonjudgmental Messiah. He is just one Enlightened Master among many who will lead the human race into a new cosmic era of enlightenment and harmony. Ron Rhodes, whose article is in this journal, carefully analyzes such current New Age interpretations and exposes them as deceptions and seductive poisons. These New Age teachings mirror, in so many ways, the older gnostic heresies found in the early church.



☐ Enclosed is a gift of \$20 per book (this includes shipping and handling).

#1 _____ #2 _____ both _____

Name _____

Address _____

City _____

State _____ Zip Code _____

**Save Your
Journal.
Photocopy
this order.**

J-20:3-4

SCP • Box 4308 • Berkeley, CA 94704

SCP JOURNAL

VOLUME 20:3-4 1996

Jesus and the Den of Thieves

Scholarly
Assaults,
New Age
Alterations,
and The
Creation
of Other
Christs,
Parts I & II

scrimmo@aol.com